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Statement submitted by International Network of Liberal Women, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Governments need to invest in social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure to redress gender inequalities. Prevailing gender stereotypes and discrimination produce an unequal division of labour in the home where women and girls shoulder the brunt of unpaid care work. The International Labour Organisation reports that women undertake more than three times as much care work compared to men. Other studies show that for example in Sub-Saharan Africa, over 70 per cent of the responsibility of collecting water for household use falls on women and girls. This also disproportionately impacts women from marginalized groups such as rural women and perpetuates a cycle of impoverishment as it limits the time, mobility and opportunities available to women. This cycle of inequalities is continuously acknowledged by the Commission on the Status of Women, as recently as the 62nd Session Agreed Conclusions but remains largely invisible and unacknowledged in government economic and social policy making.

Access to Public Services

Women's access to public services are threatened by trade and investment agreements that provide for the use of investor state dispute settlements that give corporations the right to sue governments. Investor state dispute settlements are a manifestation of the unequal power relations between corporations and governments and are problematic because they are opaque and costly processes that undermine the ability of governments to make decisions in the public interest. In this case, they make it harder for governments to regulate and deliver public services. For example, there are cases where governments have attempted to take steps to de-privatize public services for the benefit of the public interest and have been sued by corporations for doing so. The high cost of these cases therefore serves as a deterrent to States that may wish to take action to ensure women and girls have access to available, acceptable public services of high quality.

Sustainable Infrastructure

Governments, supported by international financial institutions and commercial investors make huge investments in transport infrastructure (highways, airports), sometimes at the cost of displacement of whole communities. Yet, the lack of last-mile connectivity in rural areas, the underfunding of public transport and the reduction in its quality, and the costs of travel for women whose care responsibilities require multiple trips exacerbates women's time poverty and gender inequality. Women are constrained in their access to essential health services, girls to higher educational institutions, and women producers to markets.

We are concerned by the reduced investment in public services seen globally. When public services are inaccessible, unavailable and inadequately funded the responsibility of care overwhelmingly falls on girls and women to fill the gap. We are also concerned by the push to liberalize and privatize public services. When public services are privatized they are more likely to replicate inequalities as only women from higher income households can afford these services when user fees go up. The same is true for private transport services that only operate n profitable routes, letting poor women's mobility and access to basic services, and requires them to walk long distances.

Recommendations

We reiterate the recommendations made by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights and call upon States to take measures to redistribute the burden of unpaid care work by investing in public services.

We recommend that public services remain a public good. We urge States to adhere to the guidance of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights that call on States to ensure that public services such as health, water, electricity, gas and others are available; accessible; acceptable; and of high quality.

In cases where public services have already been privatized, we call on States to regulate private service providers to ensure that they also meet these standards. Even more so in these cases States need to regulate private service providers to ensure they do not entrench and reproduce inequalities. The obligation to respect, protect and fulfil women's human rights cannot be abrogated even when public services are in the hands of private actors. This is line with their obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Social Protection

Social protection policies and systems are necessary to address existing female poverty and the social and economic exclusion of women due to various forms of discrimination and structural inequalities such as labour market discrimination, restrictions on ownership and control of land and property, unequal remuneration, the concentration of women in precarious, informal and unstable employment, workplace violence, pregnancy - related discrimination in employment, gendered divisions of household labour and the undervaluing of women's contributions to domestic, community and care work, as well as the impact of unchecked incentive systems for business enterprises, FDIs and unregulated and unequal trade systems which diminish legal protections in critical areas of social protection such as health, housing, productive and natural assets, job safety and security and wage protection. Social protections are mandated as a key element to addressing social exclusion, poverty eradication and women's economic empowerment in the Sustainable Development Goals, however International Labour Organization statistics show only 27 per cent of the world's population so far have some form of social protection.

Recommendations

We urge States to establish social protection systems that ensure healthcare, pension and income security, that prioritise the most vulnerable and at risk to and in the current context of demographic changes in the population and the nature of the job market moving towards more flexible and precarious employment to ensure particularly in cases of old age, unemployment/low job tenure, sickness, invalidity, work injury, maternity or loss of a main income earner.

We recommend that national poverty eradication schemes measure poverty trends and incidences at a substantive level beyond the statistical measure of extreme poverty in order to design appropriate social programs and social protection measures that address their specific poverty and exclusion context. This could include family nutritional levels, changes in household income spending and attrition of property and other productive assets, and female income.

We urge States to extend social protection including health protection under national protection and welfare schemes especially to women in care work and informal sectors, female headed households, domestic workers and migrant workers, women and girls with disability, and to diverse family settings as social protection is

a critical factor in ensuring their social inclusion and equal participation in the social, political and economic spheres.

We recommend that States ring fence national budgets for healthcare and social protection, especially in crisis situations such as disasters or economic crises.

We recommend that States ensure the levels of social benefits ensure a basic standard of living and are not based on strict eligibility criteria which have resulted in a situation in which many women living in poverty, in particular single mothers, older women and those without previous employment, are excluded from social protection.